

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE WILLIAM J. PERRY
 REMARKS ABOUT FRIENDLY FIRE SHOOT-DOWN OVER IRAQ QUOTED ON ABC-TV PROGRAM,
 "WORLD NEWS TONIGHT"
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PETER JENNINGS: We begin tonight with one of the deadliest friendly fire disasters in Air Force history. The Pentagon said today it was more than a mistake, it was negligent homicide. Five months ago all 26 people on board two U.S. helicopters were killed when two American F-15s shot them down over Northern Iraq. Today the Air Force brought charges against six of those involved in the attack, and they could go to prison.

Here's ABC's John McWethy.

JOHN MCWETHY: These were the two American helicopters, photographed by a Kurdish cameraman moments before they were shot down in April. The pilots of the F-15s patrolling the no-fly zone over Northern Iraq mistakenly identified the helicopters as Iraqi Hinds and moved in for the kill, firing their missiles.

[Tape of incident]

MCWETHY: Now the senior F-15 pilot, Lieutenant Colonel Randy May, who during the Gulf War actually did shoot down an Iraq Hind, is being charged with 26 counts of negligent homicide, one for each person killed, and two counts of dereliction of duty. If court-martialed and convicted, the penalty could be stiff.

REPORTER: So May could serve, theoretically, up to 26 years.

COLONEL KENNETT: That is theoretically possible.

MCWETHY: The other F-15 pilot was not charged, though he probably will be disciplined.

Officials say the charges against May are so severe because he was the squadron commander, the boss in the air, who later admitted he did not make a positive identification of the helicopter and allowed the attack to proceed anyway. "Trigger-happy" was how one Pentagon official put it.

But there was gross negligence elsewhere, as well. The crew of the AWACS radar plane was supposed to be keeping track of all aircraft flying over Northern Iraq. They failed miserably.

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE WILLIAM PERRY: Had AWACS been operating properly, there would not have been the remotest chance of this operation happening. MCWETHY: Five AWACS crew members are being charged with multiple counts of dereliction of duty. They knew the American helicopters were in the area and did not stop the F-15s from attacking.

Air Force officials say this is the first time since before the Vietnam War that criminal charges have been filed in a friendly fire incident. It makes a statement that this was not just a terrible accident, it was criminal.

John McWethy, ABC News, the Pentagon.